

Des Townson, Auckland yacht designer and sailor, was a naval cadet on Motuihe Island In early 1953.

This information comes from a book about Des Townson written by Brian Peet

Photos and text provided by www.destownson.co.nz



Post WWII New Zealand featured compulsory military service, where eighteen year olds had to join one of the three military services for fourteen weeks. The Government's objective was to establish a pool of young men who'd completed a basic military instruction course so in the event of further international hostilities, a manpower reserve would be available. Des' service was spent at the naval training base HMNZS Tamaki on Motuihe Island in the Hauraki Gulf. Years later he recalled those times fondly. A lot of good times with good friends. Fitness – we were running a lot, we were disciplined. The biggest downside was that they were constantly putting to us that we were on the brink of war and we'd soon be into it and I was terrified of that. I didn't like it and I still don't like it.

Former school friend Max Elliot picks up "At the end of my 18th year I was called into the 4th draft of naval recruits. We reported to HMNZS Philomel, Devonport on 4 January 1953 and there amongst the recruits was Des Townson. There were 120 of us. We were divided into four divisions of 30 and Des and I ended up in Cook I Division. We were transported to Motuihe Island and were set up in our dormitory. Des was on the very end of one row and I was on the opposite end of the other row. At least we knew each other amongst the seven Aucklanders, seven Wellingtonians, seven Cantabrians and seven from Southland/Otago. Each Saturday there was an inter-dormitory whaler (27ft Montague Naval Whalers) sailing race around Motuihe Island and it didn't take Des very long to become the skipper and helmsman of the whaler. One exceedingly stormy Saturday afternoon Des set the record for the around the island race. It had been his goal ever since he realized that Peter Mander, an acquaintance of his, had set a

record some years previously. The race always went the same way and was never cancelled. “You sailed out of the south beach, the south eastern end of the island, and back to the south beach jetty. Des competed every Saturday and on that very stormy day he was chuffed – absolutely delighted – to have set the record. It probably remained for many years after, because those conditions were exceptional.”

Once the fourteen weeks of training was completed the new recruits were still required to go every Monday night for three years to the HMNZS Ngaopona, a now demolished shore-based facility in the eastern corner of St Mary’s Bay. Occasionally they would have to go to Admiralty Steps and catch a launch across to the Naval Base. Max Elliot recalled, “In the navy Des was forever doodling, drawing boats. We had a few lectures but rather than taking notes he was busy designing boats. “One day I am going to design a fast yacht.” Were his words. When we were sent to HMNZS Philomel for particular training we would always have a one hour lunch break. Des discovered there was a drafting division he was able to access. He had a lot of thoughts he didn’t know the answers to. He was able to talk with those older guys who had had all the navy design training. I think he was able to partially find answers to some of the questions in his mind and help develop his own thought processes.”

The Cook I Auckland reservists were in the Navel Guard that welcomed Queen Elizabeth when she arrived with the Gothic in 1953. No doubt Junior Recruit Townson could never have imagined in fifty three years’ time the same Queen would acknowledge his life’s work with a Queen’s Birthday, New Zealand Order of Merit award.

A fitting summary from Max Elliot, “One impression I gained at school and in the navy – Des was a bit of a loner. When the team was involved, he was very much a member of the team, but if he didn’t have to participate, he was very happy with his own thoughts, his own company and probably doing his own thing. The navy soon realized he was an exceptional helmsman and he could get the absolute best out of the crew, whether they were rowing or sailing. His understanding of the wind, waves, tide and current was phenomenal and he could get the best out of any boat. It didn’t take the officers in charge very long to recognize his skills. Whenever there were inter-service competitions, he was the representative skipper.”



Des is the second from the right hand end in the back row.